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ABSTRACT

In the recent past, research on binge drinking has focused on the incidence and reasons for drinking among college students. Students at a mid-sized suburban university answered questions regarding their alcohol consumption, their reasons for drinking, and the negative experiences that they had as a result of drinking. The results of this survey indicate that the surveyed students demonstrate the same pattern of binge drinking found in similar studies. Binge drinkers cite reasons for drinking related to socialization and anxiety more often than do non-binge drinkers. Binge drinkers also experience negative personal, physiological, and social effects of consuming alcohol more frequently than drinkers who do not binge. (Author)

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Alcohol Use Among University Students: Incidence, Reasons, and Effects

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ABSTRACT

In the recent past, research on binge drinking has focused on the incidence and reasons for drinking among college students. Students at a mid-sized suburban university answered questions regarding their alcohol consumption, their reasons for drinking and the negative experiences that they had as a result of drinking. The results of this survey indicate that the surveyed students demonstrate the same pattern of binge drinking found in similar studies. Binge drinkers cite reasons for drinking related to socialization and anxiety more often than do non-binge drinkers. Binge drinkers also experience negative personal, physiological, and social effects of consuming alcohol more frequently than drinkers who do not binge.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, binge drinking on college campuses became a focus for research and changes in university and public policy. Among American college students, binge drinking may be the most pervasive and most preventable source of morbidity and mortality (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995). Drinkers can be classified as binge drinkers and frequent binge drinkers based on the rate and frequency of their drinking. A binge drinker is defined as a male who has five or more drinks in a row or a woman who has four or more drinks in a row. Frequent binge drinkers are those who reach these criteria three or more times during a two-week period. Among college drinkers, it has been estimated that 20 to 44% are binge drinkers and 19% of these are frequent binge drinkers (Wechsler et al., 1995). The purposes of this study were to compare national statistics to a smaller, more homogenous sample and to attempt to discover reasons contributing to alcohol use and abuse as well as the most frequent negative effects of drinking experienced by college students in order to identify possible avenues of effective intervention for drinking and binge drinking by college students.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Surveys were mailed to 600 randomly selected students from a mid-sized university in the eastern US. Samples of 150 students were taken from each class year. Of the original sample, 56% of the selected students were female and the remaining 44% were male, which corresponds roughly to the reported 54 to 46% female-male student ratio at the university. Students were assured that their answers would be completely anonymous. This was achieved by asking the students to refrain from reporting any identifying information on the survey. In order to determine which students had returned the survey, the participants were asked to return a separate postcard on which was printed an identification number that allowed the experimenters to remove the names and addresses from the list of selected students. There were two mailings. The second mailing took place one month after the first and included only those students whose names had not been removed from the list based on the receipt of their identification postcards. Following the two mailings, 182 responses were received, representing 30.3% of the total sample.

Materials

The survey asked students questions about drinking behavior, opinions of drinking, results of drinking experiences and demographic variables. For the purposes of the study, a drink was defined as one 12 oz. can, bottle or glass of beer, one 4 oz. glass of wine, one 12 oz. bottle, glass or can of wine cooler or one 1.25 oz. shot of hard liquor straight or in a mixed drink.

The first question assessed the recency of the student's last drink. Two questions were adapted from Cronin (1997) to determine reasons for drinking

and the rates of negative consequences of drinking experienced by students. One question measured 27 reasons for drinking, while the other inquired about 43 negative effects of drinking. Two questions were used to classify each participant as a non-drinker, a drinker, a binge drinker, or a frequent binge drinker. These definitions were taken from Wechsler et al. (1994). The last eight items were used to gather demographic information including gender, age, residential status, class standing and participation in various activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to gender, 128 (70.3%) of the respondents were female, while 54 (29.7%) were male. The mean age of the sample was 21.4 years (range = 17 to 47). Of the respondents, 45 (25.1%) were freshmen, 27 (15.1%) were sophomores, 48 (26.8%) were juniors and 59 (33.0%) were seniors. In regard to residential status, 50 (27.5%) of the respondents were campus residents, while 132 (72.5%) were commuters.

The frequencies for type of drinker as defined by Wechsler et al. (1994) can be found in Table 1. Alpha was set at .05 for all tests of significance. Chi-square analyses were used to examine the effects of gender, class year and commuter status on type of drinker, none of which were significant. A correlation between age and type of drinker was insignificant ($\underline{r} = -.10$, $\underline{p} > .05$).

When examining only those subjects who are younger than the legal limit for alcohol purchase or consumption, 10 (10.4%) of the underage people were non-drinkers, 50 (52.1%) were drinkers who did not binge, 24 (25%) were binge drinkers and 12 (12.5%) were frequent binge drinkers.

Factor analyses of reasons for and effects of drinking items resulted in 3 reasons for drinking factors and 4 effects of drinking factors. Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for each of the factors are reported in Table 2.

A factorial MANOVA was performed for the three reasons factors and four effects factors with type of drinker and gender as factors. Means and standard deviations for these variables are reported in Tables 3. A significant interaction was found ($\Lambda = .84$, $\underline{F}(14, 308) = 2.00$, $\underline{p} < .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$). Multivariate tests also revealed a significant main effect for gender ($\Lambda = .91$, $\underline{F}(7, 154) = 2.16$, $\underline{p} < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$), and a significant main effect for type of drinker ($\Lambda = .68$, $\underline{F}(14, 308) = 5.30$, $\underline{p} < .05$, $\eta^2 = .19$). Because of the differences in the percentage of variance accounted for, only the effect of type of drinker was considered meaningful.

Tests of between-subjects effects indicated significant effects for Social-Emotional Reasons for Drinking (S), Anxiety-Related Reasons for drinking (A), Romantic Reasons for Drinking (R), Behavioral and Physiological Effects of drinking (B), Signals of Problem Drinking (PD) and Social Consequences of Drinking (C), but not for Paranoid Effects of Drinking (P).

In considering differences between types of drinkers in relation to the reasons for and effects of drinking, there are no differences between binge drinkers and frequent binge drinkers. However, drinkers and binge drinkers

differ in their ratings of social-emotional, anxiety-related and romantic reasons and in the frequency with which they have experienced negative behavioral and physiological effects of drinking. In addition, drinkers and frequent binge drinkers differ in their ratings of social-emotional and anxiety-related reasons, but not in their ratings of romantic reasons. In addition, they differ in the frequency with which they have experienced signals of problem drinking and social consequences.

Table 1

Frequencies for Type of Drinker by Gender

	Male		Female		Total	
Drinker Type	N	%	N	%	N	%
Non-Drinker	3	5.6	11	8.6	14	7.7
Drinker	29	53.7	74	57.8	103	56.6
Binge Drinker	16	29.6	30	23.4	46	25.3
Frequent Binge Drinker	6	11.1	13	10.2	19	10.4

Table 2

Overall Means for Reasons and Effect Scales

Factor	M	SD	α
Social-Emotional Reasons (S)	2.54	.85	.89
Anxiety-Related Reasons (A)	1.80	.84	.78
Romantic Reasons (R)	2.09	.96	.83
Behavioral and Physiological Effects (B)	1.69	.64	.85
Signals of Problem Drinking (PD)	1.39	.51	.81
Social Consequences (C)	1.08	.29	.71
Paranoid Effects (P)	1.24	.57	.73

Note: N for each cell = 167 or 168.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Reasons and Effects Factors by Type of Drinker

	Type of Drinker		
	Drinker	Binge Drinker	Freq. Binge Drinker
Reasons			
Social-Emotional	2.21	3.09	2.95
	(.76)	(.72)	(.80)
Anxiety-Related	1.63	2.04	2.13
	(.71)	(1.01)	(.77)
Romantic	1.87	2.51	2.28
	(.87)	(.98)	(.10)
Effects			
Behavioral/	1.47	1.87	2.41
Physiological	(.48)	(.61)	(.77)
Problem Drinking	1.31	1.48	1.65
	(.46)	(.44)	(.78)
Social	1.04	1.10	1.21
Consequences	(.17)	(.31)	(.57)
Paranoid	1.24	1.20	1.39
	(.62)	(.47)	(.52)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Ns range from 19 – 103 based on frequencies reported in the text. Higher scores indicate a more important reason for drinking or a higher frequency of experienced effect.

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